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Abstracting

HANDBOOK ON COHESION POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Cohesion Policy (CP) is one of the most researched EU policies in the EU Studies political science literature reaching almost one million results on Google Scholar¹, at a simple search. The volume *Handbook on Cohesion Policy in the EU* edited by Simona Piattoni and Laura Polverari and published in 2016 is representative for the prolific literature which has emerged in the last 30 years, demonstrating the constant interest of scholars for this evolving key policy of the EU. Given this strong concern of the academic community and its relevance for public and private actors, the decision of Edward Elgar to publish a handbook dedicated entirely to this multi-faceted policy, comes as no surprise, especially as this Publishing House has produced in the recent past two other definitive handbooks related to the topic of this current volume: *Handbook on Multi-level governance* (Enderlein, Wälti and Zürn, 2015) and *Handbook of European Policies* (Heinelt and Münch, 2018), part of the *EU politics and public policy* series.

¹ 893.000 results, using the search term Cohesion Policy

This thick volume is the outcome of two years of work; structured in five parts and 32 chapters it is an ambitious intellectual effort to provide a thorough review on Cohesion Policy. It offers its readership, whether specialized or not, the necessary background and tools to grasp this key EU policy: historical and current perspectives to CP, the question of the interdependence between CP and other EU policies, evaluations of the network of actors involved in the policy-making process and affected by Cohesion policy; theoretical instruments to the study and research of CP, empirical chapters, case studies on the EU member states, as well as documentation of the current and subtle debates of CP.

In order to reach the goals of the book, the editorial team has designed the book along several innovative lines with the methodological approach of this volume consistently defined. The book includes a mixed authorial team of academic scholars and high ranked policy-makers (a former European Commissioner for Regional Policy as well as Heads of Division/Office in the European Investment Bank or in the European Court of Auditors or Committee of the Regions). Second, the topics are addressed by employing perspectives from various disciplines, with preferences from the fields of political science, economics, geography, spatial planning or the evaluation literature, showing the multiple implications of the policy and its relevance for other areas of knowledge. Third, the book draws its analysis on consistent primary data, evaluations, policy documents or maps on territorial convergence. Also, the editors paid careful attention to the design of the chapters, with explanatory tables, textboxes or figures facilitating a deep understanding of the topics addressed in the studies. Assuring a strong correspondence between the topics of the chapters located in different sections of the volume constitutes another strong point of the book.

The strength of this book originates in the design of the book and the selection of the topics to be tackled by the contributors. The Handbook dwells in the analysis on Cohesion Policy with two introductory chapters on the history and evolution of Cohesion Policy and a summative examination on the role of institutions and procedures which aim to familiarize the audience with this theme and provide the necessary knowledge for the more inexperienced readership. A second objective that these first chapters serve is to connect them with the more in-depth studies of the book. A plus of these chapters is that they include an up to date account on the evolution of Cohesion Policy, including the latest rounds of reform- the 2014 moment- as well as coverage of not only the classical institutions associated with CP, but also bodies which are less addressed in the academic literature, the European Investment Bank or the European Court of Auditors. The final section of Part 1 is dedicated to the theoretical perspectives to Cohesion Policy, starting with a selection of the dominant approaches: Economic theory, Multi-level governance and Europeanization.

The usefulness of these chapters resides in presenting the influential theoretical frameworks in the study of Cohesion Policy; but the authors do not resume to a descriptive exercise, but go a step further and identify the gaps in the academic literature and present future directions of research, offering researchers the opportunity to find new research problems to examine and apply the theoretical frameworks to new case studies.

Pleading for the political and complex character of this policy, as Piattoni and Polverari note in their introductory piece, several authors further define and explain the politicization of the policy, as the difficulties encountered in the process of reform and the financial implications of this policy; thus, the logic sequence in the transition from part one of the book to the next section, was to engage with the mobilization of actors in the context of Cohesion Policy. It covers the institutions involved in CH as well as the sub-national interests. The forte of part two, *The Politics and Institutions of Cohesion Policy*, lies in the evaluation approach of the established institutional actors of Cohesion policy; rejecting a descriptive approach of their competences, the chapters explore the role of the EU institutional decision-making triangle as well as the advisory bodies (Committee of the Regions), grouped around a joint theme: their contribution to shaping the Cohesion Policy in the context of the successive rounds of reforms, emphasizing on their agenda within the 2014-2020 negotiations. A second strong point is given by the two chapters dedicated to the non-traditional actors to Cohesion Policy, the European Investment Bank and European Court of Auditors, which do not benefit of great exposure in the literature. One of the explanations that can be brought forward is that the interest for EIB as a relevant actor in CP, gained in importance in the academic literature only in the last years, in the context of the financial crisis of 2008, but the gap persists, with a limited number of studies exploring the connection between Cohesion Policy and EIB. In the case of the European Court of Auditors, it is an institution which over time has been constantly empowered, due to the adoption by the European Commission of new public management principles, where financial performance and the culture of audit are key issues.

At first glance, *Part 3 Cohesion Policy and the Member States*, seems to be too concise for such a laborious task, if we judge in terms of the number of chapters allocated to this section (5 chapters²); but after careful analysis, one can understand the significant contribution it makes to the book, by bringing forward relevant data on the countries under scrutiny, using the comparative method; it required rigorous editorial work to organize in a coherent and structured manner the case of the 28 member states and the complex implementation process of CP with its challenges and pitfalls in just one book section (all five chapters share a template with similar issues to be

² All the other parts of the book include more than 5 chapters. Part 1 has 6 chapters, Part 2 has 8 chapters, Part 4 has 7 chapters and Part V has 6 chapters.

investigated). The method embraced by the editors was to group these countries under five headings, combining the geographical vicinity with additional innovative criteria: the southern periphery, the service economy in the north, the richest central regions, the sparsely populated countries and the case of Central and Eastern Europe. What is innovative, is that it stands out as a singular publication in the landscape of Cohesion Policy scholarship, addressing the case of all EU member states in one book, while other studies have preferred to adopt a regional approach; the case of the Southern Periphery or the Central Eastern European states after the “big-bang” enlargement, enjoy great interest on the research and publication agenda of Cohesion Policy scholarship.

Part IV, *Cohesion Policy and Broader European Strategies* and Part V, *Critical Perspectives and Debates* explore the more sophisticated themes in Cohesion Policy. A thematic pillar of Part IV concerns the intellectual evolution of CP; adopting the public policy cycle approach with a focus on the formulation stage, several chapters explain the advancement and incorporation of new concepts and themes on the agenda of Cohesion Policy: smart specialization, green economy or the urban dimension are some of the issues that are thoroughly investigated. A second issue related to the policy-making process is that multi-level governance structures create challenges to effective policy coordination, which in the case of Cohesion Policy is critical, as its success rests on the contribution of complementary policies to fulfilling its economic, social and territorial mission, showing the interdependence between EU policies. This issue is investigated in chapter 20, where the author tries to encapsulate the relation between Cohesion Policy and agricultural and rural development policies. He argues that the EU needs to increase the spending coordination mechanisms and give up the policy of merely shifting resources from one area to the other. The last chapter of Part IV picks up the story of Europeanization initiated in chapter 5, *Cohesion Policy and Europeanization*, and opens the discussion on the issue of external Europeanization of the Eastern neighborhood, a topic under the radar of scholars; the author argues that the current challenges in the Eastern European region have frozen the Europeanization process and the EU needs to re-launch this process by redesigning its policy and instruments towards the countries of Eastern Europe.

In the final section of the book, *Part V Critical Perspectives and Debates*, Cohesion Policy is assessed against its mission to provide economic and social cohesion, thus, questioning the overall effectiveness of this policy and its impact at territorial level. Particularly relevant is the methodological chapter on the issue of impact evaluation; valuable not only to an academic audience, but especially to the professional evaluation community, the author argues that the lack of a common agreement among scholars on the positive results of CP is influenced by two types of factors: the complexity of the policy and the data and methodologies used in quantitative impact evaluation. The

added value of these final sections of the Handbook is supported by the research problems selected for analysis and the quality of the argumentation; it represents a new step in the evolution and enrichment of the scholarly debate.

What are the shortcomings of the book? As it is one of the first Handbooks on Cohesion Policy which aims to fill specific gaps in the academic literature and present future directions of research, one limitation relates to the role of institutional actors. A relevant topic which is missing from the analysis is the issue of anti-fraud, as Cohesion policy is prone to creating new opportunities for corruption and fraudulent behavior. As the institution of the European Court of Auditors (ECA) is analyzed in the second part of the book, the editors could have opted to examine the audit and anti-fraud issue in a singular chapter, giving space of analysis to the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), which coordinates closely with the ECA and supports the Commission in designing anti-fraud policies; OLAF is another body which is understudied and researched, thus, filling an additional gap in the literature. An alternative solution to overcome this weakness would have been to scrutinize the issue of anti-fraud in *Part V of the book, Critical perspectives and Debates*. A second flaw of the book worth mentioning, relates to the two empirical articles of this volume. Included in distinct parts of this handbook (chapter 6 and 14), but interlinked, both chapters examine the issue of the role played by the Structural Funds at regional level. Chapter 6 questions the factors which determine the allocation of Structural Funds at regional level, by emphasizing on the quality of regional government as an explanatory variable, which is tested to illustrate the variation across EU regions, while chapter 14 tackles the question of the influence of Structural Funds allocation on the European Integration attitudes of regional parties. Using a quantitative approach, with valuable results and filling new gaps in the research on CP, the minus of both chapters is that the dataset covers the timeframe of 1989-2000, focusing only the old member states, excluding from the investigation the new developments which occurred after 2008: the financial crisis and its effects (e.g. rise in Euroscepticism) or the case of the new member states. Extending the analysis to the 2007-2013 programming period, would have confirmed the results, show a variation or strong contrast with the anterior time spans. Probably, limitations of available sources of data have played a significant role in the decision to draw on data which explained an empirical reality representative for more than a decade ago.

In sum, the book delivers on its promise to produce a comprehensive handbook on Cohesion Policy. It stands out in the plethora of studies published on the case of this abundantly researched topic; in an inventory of the books published in the last 10 years, one can notice the academic trend to the study and research of CP: emphasis on the origin and historical evolution of CP, accompanied by the successive rounds of reforms and their budgetary implications and second, prominence of specialized analyses shaped by political, economic and social contexts (reform of the

policy, enlargement process, etc.). Thus, it clearly distinguishes itself from other contributions in the field, as it offers the proper set of conceptual, theoretical and empirical tools and instruments necessary to equip a researcher in the study and investigation of different features of CP.

Concluding, this book was written with several audiences in mind, with the editorial team advancing a reading map and suggestions for the navigation through the chapters in line with the targeted audience. A first category that benefits from the results of this book is represented by students. Undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in EU Studies or Public Policy programs - where EU Policies courses are offered in the curricula-will find this book very useful, especially the introductory and theoretical chapters or the case studies examining the role of Cohesion Policy in the EU member states. Scholars with research interests in the field of Public Policies can use this handbook as a valuable teaching resource and make use of the current themes in the critical debates chapters. And not lastly, it is useful for practitioners, for bureaucrats or EU affairs policy advisers employed at local, regional or national level, interested in consolidating their expertise. 

